


The Regression Particle



Barry Oliver

The Regression Particle 

THE REGRESSION PARTICLE

by
Barry Oliver

First Published 2021

Copyright © Barry Oliver
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form,
by any means electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise without the
prior written permission of the publisher and author.
Any resemblance to any person, either living or
dead, or actual events are a coincidence.

Title: The Regression Particle

Author: Barry Oliver

Editor: Rosalie Bent & Michael Bent

Publisher: AB Discovery © 2021

www.abdiscovery.com.au

Other Books by Barry Oliver

The Rehab Regression

The Daycare Regression

The Virtual Reality Regression

The Reporter Regression

Max, the Diapered Zombie Killer

Other Books from AB Discovery

There's still a baby in my bed!

So, Your teenager is wearing diapers!

Where Big Babies Live

Home Detention

The Book Club Baby

A Woman's Guide to Babying Her
Partner

The ABC of Baby Women

Overlapping Stains

The Babies and Bedwetters of Baker
St

The Bedwetter's Travel Guide

Me, Myself, Christine

Adult Babies: Psychology and
Practices

The Joy of Bedwetting

Living with Chrissie – my life as an
Adult Baby

The Adult Baby Identity – a self-help
guide

The Adult Baby Identity – the
dissociation spectrum

Six Misfits

Six Misfits – A man and his dog

The Six Misfits – the seventh misfit

Becoming Me – The Journey of Self-
acceptance

The Epitome of Love

Australian Baby: a life of diapers,
bottles and struggles

Fear and Joy: a life in and out of
diapers

The Fulltime, Permanent Adult Infant

Diaper Discipline and Dominance
Coffee with Rosie
Being an Adult Baby
The Adult Baby Identity – coming out
as ABDL
The Adult Baby Identity – Healing
Childhood Wounds
A Brother for Samantha
Mommy's Diary
The Hypnotist
Chosen
The Snoop
The Washing Line
My Baby Callum
A Baby for Felicity
The Regression of Baby Noah
The Chronicles of Vickie
The Babysitters
Little Joshy – an eventful
transformation

The Regression Particle

Sissy babies: the ultimate submissive
Tales From The Nursery 1-6
Living Happily as an Adult Baby
Bedtime Stories for Sissy Babies (Vol
1-3)
A Baby for Melissa and her Mother
Baby Solutions
Discharged into Infancy
The English Baby
A Mother's Love
The Psychiatrist and her Patient
The Reluctant Baby
Alice and Her Baby
Damaged Goods
Embracing Infancy
One Week in Diapers
The Regression of Kylie
The Rehabilitation of Kylie

Contents

Chapter 1: The Fariq Revolution	7
Chapter 2: A Blade of Grass.....	26
Chapter 3: The Garbage Collector	38
Chapter 4: The Pavar Monastery.....	52
Chapter 5: Kapoor’s Work.	63
Chapter 6: The Sandayl Priest.....	75
Chapter 7: Inspector Druv	86
Chapter 8: Orphan in the Night.....	95
Chapter 9: Jabi and the Particle Lens	105
Chapter 10: A Time-like Direction.....	115
Chapter 11: Power of the Bhagwan	126
Chapter 12: Farhan’s Brother	136
Chapter 13: A Price to Pay	148
Chapter 14: Riding Companion	160
Chapter 15: The Curfew.....	171
Chapter 16: The Marketplace.....	180
Chapter 17: The New Pavar Monastery	191
Chapter 18: Paru’s Plan.....	202
Chapter 19: The Stowaway	213
Chapter 20: Arrested.....	220
Chapter 21: The Marketplace Games	229
Chapter 22: The Assault on Pavar	239
Chapter 23: Reunion and Loss.....	247

The Regression Particle

Chapter 24: Confronting Bendal	256
Chapter 25: Infant Redemption	267
Chapter 26: The Smoking Tiger	274
Chapter 27: A Bubble of Time	282
Chapter 28: Panthera Redeemed	291
Chapter 29: The Making of Champions	298
Chapter 30: The Mathematician	307

CHAPTER 1: THE FARIQ REVOLUTION



Kapoor Grey regarded his face in the mirror as he smeared yet another orange stripe across his fur using thick paint that left his paws stained the same color. It would take vigorous scrubbing of his paws afterward to remove the orange stain. Kapoor feared it might take hours more to remove all of the paint from his entire face at the end of the day. Presently, he was half and half. Half of Kapoor's face was the black and white spotted pattern of a snow leopard (his true self) and the other half, the painted stripes of a tiger (the fake).

I look ridiculous. I'm not fooling anyone. Everyone will laugh at me.

The Regression Particle

At age 14, Kapoor (everyone called him Kap for short) had become acutely aware of his appearance. Kap was worried that he looked more like a kid than a teenager, that his muscles had not begun to bulk as many of his friends, and that in his class at Benjamin Felis Academy, Kap was easily in the shorter half of its students.

His father, Raj Grey, had assured Kap that his growth spurt would hit any day now and that he would soon catch up to his friends. But today, Kap still looked like the skinny little kid he had been his whole life, rather than the teenager that he was. And now, staring at himself in the mirror, he looked like a silly little boy pretending to be a tiger.

They will laugh at me for sure.

“Dad! Do I really have to do this?” he called out to his father in the next room; his father who was busy with his own orange paint. Silence was Kap’s answer.

I guess that means yes. Kap proceeded to paint the second half of his face.

After he had completed the job and thoroughly scrubbed the paint from his paws, Kap stepped out of the bathroom and headed to the kitchen for a bite of breakfast before school. A pot of tea was warming on the gas burner of the stove. Kap poured himself a cup and spiced it with a little cinnamon, cardamom, and a dash of sugar. His father liked adding milk to his own tea, but Kap preferred just the spices and sugar. He took a seat at the kitchen table, sipping the warm tea, waiting for his father to join.

When Raj Grey stepped into the kitchen, Kap nearly dropped his tea. For a split second, he thought he was looking at an actual tiger.

“Well, what do you think of my artwork?”

Kap had merely painted orange stripes across his face, leaving the black spots that clearly marked him as a snow leopard. His father, on the other hand, had also used black makeup to turn his spots into stripes, creating a surprisingly tiger-like appearance when combined with the orange. Raj Grey also happened to be dressed in his full academic robes - as a professor of Theoretical Mathematics at the Venkat University, this was his usual attire - so that from a distance he could almost be mistaken for a tiger. Almost, that is, except for the ears which were distinctly leopard shaped, and Raj's long leopard tail trailing behind his robes, untouched by paint. According to the new rule, technically only face paint was required.

"Yours looks better than mine," Kap answered feeling slightly ashamed of his overly simplistic effort. "Should I add black stripes, too?"

Raj shook his head, no. "No one really cares about that, not at your school anyway. As long as you've made the effort, that's all they will care about."

"But we didn't make people paint their faces when we were in charge," Kap complained, referring to the previous mayor of Panthera City who had been a leopard.

Raj went to the stove to prepare his own spiced tea that included a splash of milk. He took a long sip before answering.

"General Fariq has his own way of doing things. For starters he is a general, not a civilian, so he prefers military showmanship including things like fancy hats, medals, and uniforms. He apparently wants his citizens to show some visible sign of loyalty, and this is his solution." Raj indicated the artwork on his face. He turned to prepare a toasted roll with cheese spread with a slice of smoked salmon on top.

“Then there’s the fact it was a coup, not an election. General Fariq gives military orders rather than drafting civilian bills.” Raj said that last part with a hint of disgust in his voice. “If this is the worst of it, we can count ourselves lucky.”

Kap looked at his own breakfast that featured a similar toasted roll, cheese spread, and salmon slice, however, each was kept separate on his plate. Kap preferred not mixing his food when possible so he could appreciate each component in its purity. He scooped a dollop of cheese with his paw and licked it off his fingers. Of course, outside the home, Kap was expected to use utensils, but he had always preferred eating with his fingers. His mother had never required utensils when Kap was little. After she had died, his father continued to permit Kap’s childish habit.

“Mom wouldn’t have agreed to it,” Kap said as he continued to lick the cheese off his fingers. “She didn’t believe in all this fake stuff.”

Raj Grey spread his own cheese onto his roll with a knife, then used that knife with a fork to cut off a square and place it into his mouth, all without ever touching the food with his paws. As he watched his son eating messily with his fingers, the memory of his wife, Noora, left a trace of a smile on his face.

“Your mother would have made a game of it, I’m sure. She would have probably painted herself like a tiger from head to tail. You, too. She would have then invited all your friends over to paint them as well, then thrown a big tiger party for all of them.” Raj’s smile broke into a chuckle. “Your mother always made the best of every situation.”

Kap had to agree with his father. His mother had in fact been playful like that. As he got older, Kap’s memory of his mother was fading more and more (he had only been four years old when she

died), but the one memory that would never fade was of her playfulness.

Noora Grey genuinely loved playing with Kap when he was little. She loved the parties, the toys, and all the little kid games. She had loved romping with him in newly fallen snow, as well as playing in the rain and jumping in puddles. She even liked rolling in mud with him (it had been one of little Kap's favorite things) and could manage to get muddier than a four-year-old cub, and that was saying a lot. And *yes*, she absolutely *would* have painted him from head to tail as a tiger and thrown a tiger party for all his friends. Noora would have made a game of it.

But Kap wasn't a little kid anymore, and this wasn't a game. It felt more like humiliation. He wondered how his friends would react to his new, phony appearance.

"What about my friend, Benda?" Kap asked his father next. "He's a tiger. Are we not allowed to be friends anymore?"

Raj held his hands up to the air. "Who said anything about that?" he said incredulously. "Of course, you can be friends! Why would it be any other way?" Raj set his fork and knife down. "Listen to me. The Fariq Revolution has only changed things at the top, the highest levels of government. Everyone else, from mid-level officials all the way down to your school headmaster and the vendors on the street, are all the same people. Your friends are the same today as they were yesterday. Other than this silly face paint, our lives will go on as usual."

Raj picked up his fork and knife and cut another bite of his breakfast roll. As an afterthought, he added, "Then one day General Fariq will be replaced by the next fool with his own ideas. The rest of us will go on living as we always do."

Kap next skewered a piece of smoked salmon with his claw, then twirled it around his fingers before popping it into his mouth.

He would encounter his friends soon enough as it was nearly time to leave for school.

“I might be a little late coming home today,” he said after licking his paw clean. “Some of us are going to play football after school.”

Raj finished the last bite of his roll using his fork or course, then washed it down with the last of his tea. “That’s two of us, then. I have a faculty meeting after work. We will each be on our own for dinner.”

Kap went to the sink to wash his paws. Although he had licked them clean which had always been good enough as a cub, he was older now. He was expected to wash. As Kap dried his paws with a dishtowel, he caught the reflection of his poor makeup job in the window just above the sink. He felt ridiculous all over.

“Okay. We’ll both be late.”

His father rose from the table and placed his arm around Kap’s shoulder in a half-hug. He wanted to kiss his son on his head but that was a cub thing that had become embarrassing to his teenage son. Thus, a hug would have to do.

“Things will return to normal. You’ll see.” He also wanted to say, *I love you*, but that would cause similar embarrassment. “You’ll see,” he repeated.

When Kap stepped outside his home onto the street, things certainly felt normal. He was wearing his usual school uniform that displayed the Benjamin Felis emblem on a crisply ironed white shirt, a black tie, and charcoal grey trousers. In the winter, he would wear a heavy sport jacket over his shirt which he found ridiculous since, as a snow leopard, he preferred running naked through the snow. But that was yet another cub thing. Clothes were now

required. But for now, since it was early fall, there was no need for a jacket.

His home street, lined with brownstone houses with their neatly trimmed shrubs behind decorative iron gates, also looked the same as before. One or two streetlamps still glowed their soft yellow light from nearly burnt-out phosphor stones.

Up ahead, a horse-drawn trolley car was pulling into the intersection right on schedule. Kap knew he could catch the next one in a few minutes, but he wanted to get to school early, so he jogged to the intersection.

The trolley driver was an old leopard with hunched shoulders and thin, boney paws. He displayed a single orange stripe on his forehead as if in defiance - as if he was too old to care. Kap handed the driver a coin, not feeling so bad now about his own shoddy paint job. He then climbed on board. The trolley was big enough to carry ten passengers, but at the moment there was only one other person seated, a businessman with his face buried behind a newspaper.

Kap took a seat on the opposite bench waiting for the trolley to move on to its next stop. He took a deep breath of the cool morning air. He caught a hint of the lacquer painted wood of the trolley. Everything smelled the same, too.

It's just another school day. A little face paint doesn't change anything.

The trolley cart lurched forward under the strain of its four horses. Kap felt his old confidence returning.

I can't wait to see my friends.



The rotunda at Benjamin Felis Academy was the first sight students had when entering the building. It had been Kapoor Grey's first intimidating view of the school when he had walked into the Academy five years before. Intimidating because it was a huge circular forum with a massive domed ceiling and walls lined by paintings of the previous Academy headmasters. Nine-year-old Kap had thought they all looked angry and were somehow angry at him.

Now, the headmaster paintings were hardly noticed by anyone except the newly arriving nine-year-old students. The rotunda was merely a convenient meeting place where now 14-year-old Kap would hang out and meet with his friends before the start of class. He currently stood in the center of the room where an oversized statue of the Academy's founding headmaster, Professor Felis himself, a leopard, seemed to gaze admiringly upward at the domed ceiling.

Kap observed that varying degrees of effort had been put into the orange face paint of his fellow students—some were very realistic, others were more like the trolley driver's single stripe. Kap's own facial artwork was somewhere in the middle and that was a relief.

"Hey Kap, what's up?" Kap's leopard friend, Tadoor - Tad for short - was the first to greet him in the rotunda. Tad had done a slightly better painting job than Kap, having used some black paint along with the orange as Raj Grey had done.

"The ceiling," Kap replied dryly, voicing their long-running joke. That joke had once been funny when they were nine. Now it was just something they said when they greeted.

The Regression Particle

“Can you believe this?” Oscar, Kap’s panther friend, was the next to arrive. His makeup job was hardly better than the old trolley driver’s, consisting of just three thin orange stripes painted against his black fur. “I look like a tiger, a literal freaking tiger!” Oscar waved his arms dramatically. “I mean, you can’t tell the difference. It’s a perfect disguise.”

Tad and Kap both rolled their eyes and moaned. Oscar was always making sarcastic jokes.

Tad suddenly looked seriously worried about something. “Wait a second.” He reached for Oscar’s shirt. “What’s this?”

When Oscar looked down, Tad jerked his finger upward to hit Oscar’s nose. It was another long-standing joke among his friends that barely got a reaction from Oscar.

“You’re just jealous,” Oscar continued in fake mockery. “I don’t know if I can hang out with you guys anymore. Where’s the tiger crowd?”

“In that case,” Kap replied, “we’ll have to find a replacement to play football this afternoon.”

“Oh no!” Oscar jogged a quick circle around his two friends. “You don’t get off that easy. I enjoy beating you too much.”

Of Kap’s friends, Oscar was easily the most athletic of the group and had in fact run a circle around Kap once on the field just to show that he could. But football was a sport about cooperation and passing the ball. Kap and his group of friends could give Oscar plenty of competition on the field.

“Tiger’s here.” Bendal, Kap’s tiger friend announced as he arrived. Bendal’s eyes were averted down, and his voice sounded apologetic. “I’m sorry about all of this guys. It’s silly, really.”

Of Kap's three best friends, Bental was the tallest and most muscular, having a true tiger physique. Where Oscar was the fastest of the four, Bental was easily the strongest. Yet, since they had been cubs, Bental had always been the shyest and most self-conscious. Bental never took advantage of the strength they all knew he had. He never seemed to appreciate his status as a tiger. Bental had always relied on his friends to boost his confidence.

"So, you're responsible for this?" Oscar taunted as he now circled around Bental.

"Yeah, he's to blame," Tad added next before the two of them pounced on Bental and wrestled him to the ground. It was obvious that Bental allowed them to do so.

The three of them rolled on the ground like little cubs, fake punching and biting while Kap stood over them rolling his eyes, embarrassed. Fellow students walking by snickered at the wrestling teens. Kap just waved them on.

"Keep moving. There's nothing to see here."

After a full minute of this, Oscar spoke up. "You had enough?"

"Yeah, yeah, I give up," Bental replied, almost laughing.

Oscar punched him in the arm one last time. "You know we only beat you because we like you."

"That's right," Tad replied, gently slapping the side of Bental's face. "It wouldn't hurt so much if we didn't like you."

Kap extended both paws to help his friends off the floor. "Children," he scolded. "That's enough."

Tad, Oscar, and Bental stood up smoothing their wrinkled shirts and straightening their ties calmly as if they had not just wrestled on the floor like cubs. Kap regarded his friends critically,

comparing them to passing students in the rotunda. Other than the face makeup, the world around him seemed to be unchanged.

“Do you think all of this changes anything?” Kap asked his friends somberly. His right ear turned sideways as he spoke. It was a small automatic habit Kap had done his entire life when he felt uncertain, a habit he was unaware of, though his friends were well familiar with it. “You know, everyone walking around wearing face paint, well... half of us anyway.” Obviously, Bendal and the tiger population were unaffected by the new rule.

Tad turned and regarded the other Benjamin Felis students walking by. “I don’t think we’ll change. It’s just a game. People will eventually get tired of it and stop doing it. You’ll see.”

“Well, when I’m in charge,” Oscar spoke next, “you can forget the face paint. I’ll require sports jerseys. No more shirts and ties. You’ll have to wear the jersey of your favorite team. And if you don’t have a team, you’ll have to wear a bright pink shirt so everyone will know and laugh at you.”

Tad frowned at that. “Hey, I like pink.”

Bendal interrupted. “Speaking of things not changing, isn’t that your girlfriend standing alone over there?” He pointed to a female tiger student pretending to show interest in the headmaster paintings above.

Kap turned reflexively to follow Bendal’s paw. His mouth unconsciously dropped open. Paru Burman was not technically his girlfriend since they had never formally agreed to it. Still, Kap felt a funny sensation inside his chest anytime he was near her. He did stupid things like opening his jaw without knowing it. Yes, he very much wanted her to be his girlfriend.

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Kap’s answer sounded like a whine. “She’s just a friend. You know, like you guys are my friends.”

The Regression Particle

Oscar snorted and choked back a laugh. “Well, it looks like your *friend* could use a friend right now.” Paru continued to stand alone with her back turned toward Kap and his group. Oscar nudged Kap in the rib. “Go on. Go talk to her.”

Kap tried to sound nonchalant. “Oh sure. Why wouldn’t I?” His toe caught on the floor and he almost tripped with his first step.

Oscar snorted again. “Those smooth floors really jump out at you, don’t they?”

... And stupid things like tripping over his own feet, Kap mused. He pretended not to notice the trip and jogged over to where Paru was standing by herself.

“Uh... Hey Paru,” Kap said tentatively, trying to pull Paru’s attention away from the paintings above.

Paru quickly turned toward Kap and smiled. She hadn’t really been interested in the paintings. “Oh. Hi Kap,” she said cheerfully. Then her expression dropped, and she became apologetic. “Oh. I’m really sorry about that. I can’t believe they make students paint their faces.”

For a full second, Kap didn’t understand what Paru was talking about as if he couldn’t understand speech. “Uh... Oh this. It’s just makeup. Like a tiger. You’re a tiger. I don’t mind. I mean, I don’t mind the paint. I do mind you. I mean, I mind you in a good way. Like a tiger...”

... And stupid things like not being able to talk.

Paru smiled again and reached for Kap’s paw. Her touch instantly calmed Kap’s nerves. “Well, I’m glad you don’t mind. I think it’s a dumb rule anyway.”

Kap didn’t know what to say next. He thought furiously. “Um... Me and my friends are going to play football after school. It

would be okay if you want to watch.” Kap almost slapped his face. “I mean, would you like to meet me and um... watch, um... us play?” He felt like melting into the ground.

Paru pulled her paw away and gave him a hurt look. “Kapoor Grey,” she scolded. “You don’t think I can keep up with the boys? Just because I’m a girl?” She folded her arms and scowled at him. “I’ll only come if you let me play. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Kap’s jaw dropped open again. “Oh, I didn’t mean... because you’re a girl... I meant, yes, you can play with me... I mean *us*... football... if you want.” He was starting to feel miserable.

Paru’s expression softened, then she reached for Kap’s paw again and smiled. “Okay. See you then.” She winked, then turned and skipped off toward her first class.

Kap returned to his three friends who had obviously been staring the whole time.

“Well, what did she say?” Oscar prodded.

Kap stared at his paw, the one Paru had touched. “She said she wants to come and watch us play footfall this afternoon. Well, actually Paru said she will only come if she gets to play. But I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Oscar’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Are you kidding? Have you seen her run? Hell yes, she can play. But only if she plays on my team. In fact, just Paru and me against the three of you. You’re dead meat.”

Kap whined. “But she’s supposed to be on my team.”

Tad grinned at that. “Your girlfriend team,” he teased.

Kap punched Tad’s arm. “Stop it. We’re just friends.”

The Regression Particle

“Hey guys,” Bendal interrupted. “The bell is about to ring. We need to get to class. We can talk more at lunch. Got to go.” Their tiger friend headed toward one of the hallways branching off the rotunda.

“We’ll talk again at lunch,” Oscar agreed and jogged away toward his own class.

Tad and Kap shared their first class, so they walked away together. Kap took a deep breath as all tension seemed to fade away. Yes, the world had not really changed because of General Fariq. All was as it had been before. He loved school. He loved his friends. He loved his city. Kap still felt he was at home where he belonged.

Kap put his arm around Tad’s shoulder, who did the same to him. They had been lifelong friends since they were little cubs and often held arms or paws as they had their entire life.

“Better get moving, or we’ll be late,” Kap said. The two friends made their way out of the rotunda.



Except for the face paint, Kap’s school day proceeded as usual, that is, until lunchtime. That’s when he noticed the first real change and it was not subtle. He and Bendal had just walked through the food serving line and were looking for a seat in the main dining hall.

“It wouldn’t kill you to have a vegetable on your plate,” Kap commented of Bendal’s tray which consisted entirely of meat except for a slice of bread.

Bendal looked at Kap's vegetable-laden tray and wrinkled his nose. "It might," he sneered.

"You can have some of mine," Kap said sarcastically. "I'll share."

"No thanks." Bendal acted like he was gagging.

Kap searched the dining tables looking for his other two friends. That's when he noticed it. All the students were sitting separately with their own species: the tigers on one half of the room, the leopards on the other, and a much smaller group of tables for the panthers.

Bendal and Kap looked at each other, confused. "What's going on?" Kap said to his tiger friend. "When did this happen?"

Kap located Oscar sitting at the panther tables. The two of them made eye contact, then Oscar looked quickly away. He made no move to join Kap and Bendal.

"What the hell," Kap muttered.

At that moment, Tad stood from one of the leopard tables and walked over to his dumbfounded friends. "Hey Kap," he said with a half-hearted smile. "I saved a seat. You can sit with me."

Kap looked from Tad to Bendal and back. Tad's invitation didn't seem to include their tiger friend.

"Hey, Bendal. Want to sit with us?" A boy from the tiger tables walked up to them. It was Danta, one of the most popular boys at the school.

Bendal looked at Kap even more confused. Danta had never said word-one to him before. For all their years at Benjamin Felis, Danta had barely recognized Bendal's existence. Danta was handsome and confident. He was friends with nearly half the school. Bendal had never been included in that crowd.

"He's with us," Kap said with a hint of uncertainty in his voice. He looked to Tad as if to ask, *Is he with us?*

Danta put his arm around Bendal's shoulder. "Come on. I'll introduce you to some of my friends." He guided Bendal away with him.

Tad reached for Kap's arm. "Come with me before someone takes your seat."

Kap continued to stare at Danta pretending to be friends with Bendal. Tad tugged him away toward his own table. Arriving at their table, that's when Kap noticed the reason behind it all. The table was labeled, "Leopards."

Kap looked at Tad in shock. "What's this?"

"Assigned seating," Tad replied. "I guess it's a new rule."

"We're not in elementary school anymore," Kap complained. "We can sit anywhere we want."

Tad shrugged his shoulders. "It's a new rule."

Kap set his food tray down but continued to stand.

"We're teens, not little cubs. We break rules," he said defiantly.

Tad shrugged his shoulders again and took a seat at the table. Kap looked over to Oscar at the panther table. His friend had shifted his chair so as to turn his back completely toward Kap to avoid eye contact. Everywhere he looked, Kap saw students not breaking the rules, sitting obediently with their own species.

Then Kap spotted Paru sitting at one of the tiger tables. He took a deep breath and decided he was going to break this new rule regardless of the consequence. He walked over to her. As usual, when approaching his would-be girlfriend, Kap could feel his

confidence begin to waver. His feeling was made worse this time by the unfriendly stares directed at him from the surrounding tiger tables.

“Uh... Hi Paru.” Kap’s voice faltered. “I, uh, saved a seat at my t-table. You can sit with me if... if you want.”

“Oh, hi Kap,” Paru looked up from her plate, then glanced away. “I was just talking with my friends here.” She indicated the four girls sitting at her table labeled, “Tigers.” The girls did not look pleased to see Kap. “We were going to get together after school and, you know, talk about girl stuff.” Now it was Paru’s turn to lose her confidence. “S-So, I’m sorry, I... I don’t think I can play football today.”

Now Paru tried to avoid eye contact with Kap, but the other girls continued their hostile staring. Kap took a step back. “Uh, sure. That makes sense. I mean, it’s okay. Maybe some other time.”

“Maybe,” Paru said softly, staring at her plate.

Kap shuffled away from the tiger tables back to the leopards. He took a seat with Tad. His shoulders slumped.

“What did she say?” Tad asked cautiously.

“Nothing,” Kap grumbled. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He picked up a roll and took an unenthusiastic bite.

Tad turned toward his own food tray. The two of them proceeded to eat their lunch in silence.



That afternoon, Kap stood at his bathroom sink holding a soapy washrag that was stained orange. He scrubbed his face

violently. Kap had decided he was in no mood to play football that afternoon, so he had come directly home from school. His father was still at his faculty meeting, so Kap was alone in the house. He looked at his face in the mirror with its orange smears from paint that was stubborn to wash off.

“I hate General Fariq,” he cursed. “Fuck him!”

Kap resumed scrubbing his face angrily. When he had finally removed most of the orange, Kap sat on the bathroom floor and held his head in his paws. He remembered everyone sitting at their separate tables at lunch and the hostile stares they had given him when he had tried to cross over.

“What’s happening to everyone? Why are they just going along with it?”

He rocked his head from side to side. Even his friends had allowed themselves to be split up. Next, he thought about Paru and how thrilling it had felt to hold her hand that morning, how exciting and yet normal everything had seemed. Then lunchtime, and everything changed. Paru’s lame excuse for not joining his friends that afternoon, the angry stares from her friends.

“Does she even like me anymore?”

Kap curled his legs to his chest and lowered his eyes to his knees. He squeezed them closed tightly. Kap could feel the emotion coming up from his chest, but even with no one watching, he felt ashamed to cry.

I’m a teenager. I’m not supposed to lose control like this.

But Kap knew he couldn’t stop it. The first tears burned their way through his closed eyes.

Stop it! Don’t do it!

Next, his shoulders began to tremble, and his breath became difficult.

I don't want to cry! I just want my friends back!

Finally, unable to hold it off, Kap rolled onto his side as the sobbing took control of his body.

I just want to play football and have a girlfriend.

That thought only made the sobbing worse.

CHAPTER 2: A BLADE OF GRASS



Kap knocked on the door to his father’s study that occupied much of the second floor of their two-story townhome. It was Saturday and Kap had no plans to go out today, thus there was no need for orange face paint. His fur was mostly white with black spots—its natural color—mostly, that is except for hints of orange that had proven impossible to wash away. It would have been easier to just leave the paint on, but after what was happening at school, he insisted on washing it off every night.

“Come in,” came his father’s response.

Kap opened the door to see his father, Professor Raj Grey, sitting at a large oak desk with books and papers scattered about him in apparent disarray. Behind his father was a large chalkboard covered with hundreds of mathematical symbols and equations

written in chalk. His father was hunched over a sheet of paper, writing ever more of those incomprehensible symbols. His own face was still painted the orange and black pattern of a tiger. He had found it much easier to leave the damned stuff in place. Kap approached the desk and regarded some of the books and papers covering its surface.

“You’ve been in here a lot lately,” he said picking up a sheet of paper covered with equations. “What are you working on?”

Kap felt intimidated by the mysterious symbols that were somehow math. Despite his father’s profession, mathematics was not Kap’s strongest subject.

Raj looked up from his work to see his son holding one of his papers. He motioned for Kap to replace it exactly where it had been.

“I’m sorry,” he said in his usual calm patience. “Despite the appearance, I do keep everything in a certain order.”

Kap’s father then stood from his chair and turned to look over the equation-covered chalkboard.

“The University in its infinite wisdom,” he spoke with a hint of sarcasm, “has decided they want me to give a formal presentation of my work—all of it. Despite the fact that I have published a dozen papers on the subject, and I’m a fully tenured professor, they want me to present as if I were a Ph.D. student giving his thesis defense.”

Kap could detect notes of resentment in his father’s otherwise calm voice.

“And they want the presentation to be this Monday.” Raj turned back to his chair and took a seat. “Therefore, I have a mountain of work to do. I’m afraid you’re going to be mostly on your own this weekend. Maybe you can get with your friends and play some football.”

The Regression Particle

Kap shook his head, no. Football had not been a thing for him and his friends lately. Although the tears had dried up, Kap still felt a kind of lonely resentment over the issue. He wished his father would wash off the fake tiger paint.

Next, Kap picked up an object from his father's desk that was being used as a paperweight. The object looked like black obsidian with smooth, rounded surfaces front and back. It was the size of Kap's paw. The thing also felt much heavier than expected, as if it were made of metal instead of glass.

"What is this?" he asked, hoping to avoid the subject of his friends and football.

Raj looked up again from his work. "Oh, it's just a lens."

Kap held the black object up to his eyes and wrinkled his brow. "A lens? But you can't see through it."

His father grinned. "It's not a lens for light. It's a lens for subatomic particles. We used it in the University's particle accelerator. The thing developed a crack in it, so now it makes a good paperweight."

Kap inspected the perfectly smooth surface of the black lens. "A crack?"

Raj nodded. "The crack is on the inside. We could tell by the way the particles were scattering." He thought a moment more, then reached for the sugar tin next to his tea pot. "Let me show you something." He took a pinch of sugar and ground it between his fingers onto the desktop. "Come take a look. What's the smallest thing you can see?"

Kap leaned close to the scattered sugar crystals and squinted. "I guess that speck right there, just to the side of the bigger crystal."

His father then reached across the desk to retrieve a handheld magnifying glass. “Now look and tell me what you see.”

Kap took the magnifier and focused on the crystals. “Yes, I can see pieces even smaller than that speck.”

“And if you were shrunk to the size of that smallest piece, and I were to give you another magnifier, what do you think you would see?”

Kap sensed a lecture coming on by the tone in his father’s professorial voice. He had learned all about molecules and atoms in school, so he knew the answer. “Atoms.”

Raj smiled. “And beyond atoms, more particles all the way down to points of nothing - points with no dimension whatsoever.” He folded his arms as if he had achieved his goal. “That’s what the Standard Theory tells us, that everything can be reduced to dimensionless point particles.”

Kap set the magnifier down and tried to appear interested. He had learned about those things, too. He feared his father would next start to write out equations to prove his point.

Raj continued. “But how do objects of zero dimension possess properties? How can one point particle be in any way different from another? How does a property like mass or charge hang on to something of no spatial extent?”

Kap groaned quietly. He suspected he was about to find out.

“Years ago, a great mathematician proposed that the smallest things might, in fact, be tiny lines of at least one dimension. Particles could then have different properties depending upon how those lines vibrated, like different notes on a piano.” Kap’s father stood from his chair and turned back toward the chalkboard.

The Regression Particle

“Unfortunately, what you see there on the board describes the simplest, most basic interaction between two of those vibrating lines. The math is quite difficult, even for your father.” Raj took a seat again at his desk. He then held up two pencils.

“Now, suppose each of these pencils is one of those fundamental line particles.” He then laid them on a sheet of paper at right angles to each other and rolled one across the other. “If you wedge them together, they can sweep out one of these, a plane.” He held up the sheet of paper. “You can bend it, twist it, crumple it up.” He crumpled the paper in his paw, then flattened it out. “There are vastly more states it can assume than a simple line.” Raj then held the pencil up. “Each one of these is called a Blade, like a blade of grass. Combining them together gets you this, a plane, called a 2-Blade. You can then sweep planes across each other to get a volume, called a 3-Blade.”

Raj paused to let the significance of his statement sink into his son’s mind. Kap, however, was still stuck on the grass reference, and how a blade of grass could have anything to do with subatomic particles.

His father continued. “The mathematics allows you to make 4-Blades, 5-Blades, and so on, as many as you like.” He turned his chair back toward the chalkboard. “Unfortunately, the math becomes astronomically difficult. If the fundamental particle is a 2-Blade, like this sheet of paper, the simplest interaction between two of them would take more chalkboards than could fit in this house. Describing a 3-Blade interaction would take more chalkboards than could fit in Panthera City.”

Kap held up his hand to interrupt. “Don’t you mean Tigris City?”

Professor Raj Grey huffed in disgust. “Of course, that’s what I meant to say.”

The Regression Particle

The name change of his beloved city was not easy to accept. It was just one more insult thrown at them by the autocratic General Fariq.

Raj turned his chair back to the desk to resume his lecture. “But something magical happens when you get to seven dimensions, a 7-Blade.”

He reached for one of the several stacks of paper on his desk and retrieved a single sheet. On it was written a single equation using yet more symbols Kap had never seen before.

“It all collapses down to this. Just one, single, beautiful equation.” Raj smiled, folded his arms, and leaned back in his chair, a gesture of triumph. “That single equation represents my entire research.” He then quickly added, “I should say *our* research. I couldn’t have done it without the help of my colleague, Professor Mankit. The two of us have been working on this since you were a cub.”

Kap picked up the black particle lens one more time admiring its smooth surface and deceptive weight. He hoped his father’s lecture was over and that he could excuse himself soon. “Well Dad, I better let you get back to your work.”

Raj held up his finger to keep Kap a moment longer. “This brings me to my request to you. I would like you to attend my presentation at the University on Monday. I would like you in the audience as my guest.”

Kap shook his head emphatically and put the particle lens down. “Dad, I really don’t understand any of this. Something about sugar crystals and blades of grass. This really isn’t my thing.”

Raj shook his own head patiently. “That’s not what I’m asking. You will not be coming to hear my lecture. In fact, I would be

happy if you didn't listen to a word I say. You will be coming to observe the audience."

Kap narrowed his eyes in confusion. His right ear made its sideways turn. "What? I don't understand. What am I supposed to do?"

Raj Grey stood from his chair, walked around his desk, and put his arm around Kap's shoulder. "Your friends aren't the only ones affected by this." He pointed to the makeup on his face. "Everyone is taking sides, even at the University. I don't know who my friends or opponents are these days. And I will be too focused on my presentation to pay attention to the audience. I want you to pay attention. Let me know who nods and who shakes their heads, who smiles and who frowns, who is taking notes and who doesn't bother. It doesn't matter if you don't know their names. Just tell me afterward where they sat. They all sit in the same place every time. I'll know who you're talking about."

Kap looked down at his feet to avoid his father's eyes. "D-did someone tell you about my friends?"

Raj gave Kap's shoulder a squeeze then leaned over to kiss his son's forehead. "Kap, you haven't stayed after school to play football this entire week. I believe Oscar is a panther and Bental is a tiger."

Kap looked shocked that his Dad knew these details.

"Yes, I know who your friends are," Raj responded. "And I suspect I know what is going on at your school. They are splitting everyone up, aren't they? By species. They are keeping leopards and tigers and panthers separate. God forbid there are any dogs at your school." Raj lifted his son's chin up to look him in the face. "That leaves just you and Tad, your leopard friend. It's hard to play football with just two."

Kap was silently relieved his Dad hadn't mentioned Paru Burman. "I don't understand why everyone just goes along with it," he complained. "I mean, why don't people break the rules? Especially my friends?"

Raj nodded, ever patient with his son. "It's because people are afraid. No one knows how serious this General Fariq is about enforcing the rules, or what the consequences will be for those who break them. Everyone is watching and waiting. I suggest you do the same while being patient with your friends. They still care about you. They're merely acting out of self-defense."

Kap thought about his Dad's words for a moment. It made some sense, however, didn't his friends know that he would never hurt them under any circumstances? That he would always stick up for them?

"What about *your* friend?" Kap replied. "Professor Mankit. Will he be at your lecture?"

Raj stepped away from his son and walked to the window that overlooked the front street below.

"Professor Mankit is not a preferred species at the Venkat University." He seemed to take interest in a horse-drawn carriage passing by. "Thus, he is no longer a professor at the University and will not be attending my defense." Raj turned away from the window and looked at his son with a distinct expression of sorrow painted across his false tiger stripes. "Fear does not discriminate, Kap. You are not alone in this."



So as to have a direct view of the audience and their all-important response to his lecture, Raj Grey had placed a chair for

his son on the lecture stage itself. The chair was just to the right of the podium with its massive chalkboard upon which the Professor would write his equations. Kap had been given no introduction before Raj began his talk. He was merely an unnamed child seated on the stage as if he were somehow, unexplainably a prop for the Professor's lecture.

This all had the effect of making Kap feel like he was in the direct line of fire of their disapproving criticism. Any movement he made, however small, seemed to draw their immediate attention, so Kap tried not to move at all. He wished he could somehow become invisible.

The audience were all esteemed professors and colleagues of Raj Grey, important men and women at the University. There were no students attending the lecture, or children for that matter except for the one in their direct line of sight—Kapoor Grey.

On the whole, there were very few smiles to be found in the crowd. His father had been writing at the chalkboard for some time now, filling nearly half of it with the mysterious language of mathematics that Kap could not decipher.

"As you can see," Professor Grey finally turned from his writing to face the audience, "this is what it takes to describe the simplest 2-Blade interaction. We have not the time in a year, nor the chalkboards in the city to move to the next higher dimension."

Kap noticed little reaction from the audience to his father's lecture so far. Apparently, what he had shown was already familiar to them, information that he had already published. His father then returned to the board and wrote his next words with large, bold strokes.

THE MANKIT-GREY THEOREM

The Regression Particle

The audience now stirred. That name, Mankit, was clearly unloved. It was met with frowns, shaking heads, and lowered eyes. That name was almost universally disapproved around the lecture hall, almost that is but for the reaction of a curious tiger seated in the center of the second row. That tiger was curious, in Kap's opinion, because his reactions had been nearly the opposite of everyone else's during the lecture. He tended to smile when others frowned and nod his head when others shook in the negative. That tiger now closed his eyes and nodded quietly, seeming to approve.

Kap, of course, had no idea who the tiger was, nor the names of anyone else in the audience. His father had assured Kap that he knew where everyone sat in the auditorium, so Kap focused on counting rows and seats. *Tiger, row two, seat four.* He made the mental note.

Raj Grey proceeded with more equations. At one point a leopard, displaying the requisite orange face paint, stood from his seat and interrupted. "Professor. I wonder if you might take a moment to write the energy equation. The particle you are proposing is quite small. Perhaps you could show us how much energy it would take to detect something so small."

Leopard, first row, seat two, Kap noted.

Raj Grey paused mid-equation. The requested calculation was not part of his current derivation, so he took several steps to his right and wrote the new calculation on a blank section of the chalkboard. His final line was the numeral 9 followed by a long string of zeros.

This was met by more disapproval: gasps at such a preposterous number. Even the tiger in row two, seat four, seemed surprised by it.

The leopard who had asked for the calculation spoke again. “Professor, that is over a million times more energy than we can produce with our most powerful accelerator. It’s unachievable!”

Raj Grey looked at the number again, thoughtfully. “A hundred million at least,” he muttered. “But that is for engineers to solve,” he added as if theoretical mathematicians should not be concerned by such practical matters. He took three steps to his left and resumed his original derivation.

At last, Kap’s father arrived at the simple (though incomprehensible to Kap) equation that he had shown his son the day before. He stepped back from it and turned toward the audience.

“The Mankit-Grey Equation,” he announced as a simple fact, without drama.

The leopard in the first-row, seat two, rose again. This time he stepped onto the stage with Raj Grey. “I’m sorry Professor Grey, but you have made a mistake.” He indicated the final lines of Raj’s calculations with an accusing finger. “These terms are not canceled by the denominator. The metric you used doesn’t match. Your final equation is therefore incorrect.”

Kap took a sharp breath. He thought his father might actually become angered, a thing he had rarely seen. He could tell that the audience seemed to expect the same thing. Raj Grey, however, maintained his cool as ever. He calmly pointed to a single symbol in his derivation.

“This variable is a *second* time dimension, not spatial. With five spatial and two time-like dimensions, my equation is correct.”

The audience erupted in a combination of laughter and outrage. Kap scanned the crowd in desperation. He couldn’t keep track of all the varying reactions.

The Regression Particle

The unnamed leopard on the stage with Raj Grey was equally incredulous. “Do you realize what you are saying? Do you honestly expect us to accept it? That there are *two* time dimensions? That this 7-Blade particle of yours could literally be doing two things at the same time?”

Raj paused before answering. “Two different and perpendicular times, but yes.”

The audience were now all rising from their seats in discussion among themselves. It was clear they were preparing to leave. The leopard at the chalkboard with Raj Grey made his way off the stage. The Mankit-Grey Theorem lecture had come to a premature end.

Kap managed to find his voice. “B-But he’s not finished. There’s more,” he said in a frail voice that could not be heard above the noise in the room. Kap looked helplessly to his father. “You’re not done with your lecture. Why are they leaving?”

Raj lowered his eyes and shook his head. “That last part about two time dimensions. They won’t believe it. I think we’re done.” His father went to the lecture podium to retrieve his papers.

Kap looked out over the crowd one last time as they were making their way for the doors. He spotted the tiger who had been in row two, seat four. Unlike the others, that tiger was smiling, softly but unmistakable. Kap noted it again. He would tell his father about everything he saw, but especially that one tiger. However, at the present moment, it seemed more important to exit the lecture hall quickly.

CHAPTER 3: THE GARBAGE COLLECTOR



Kap was seated across from his father at an outdoor cafe that overlooked the largest open-air market in central Tigris City. He still thought and forever would think of it as Panthera City, but regardless of the new name, this was Kap's favorite place in the city. The Marketplace, as it was known, was always bustling with activity where people shopped, bartered, and often argued while doing both. All the while diners sat around its numerous outdoor cafes eating any number of delicacies while sipping various coffees or teas. Kap always looked forward to coming here.

Despite the noise of the crowded market, the cafe tables provided a sort of private intimacy where he and his father could talk seemingly alone. Kap and his father were currently nibbling on

spiced trout sandwiches and sipping an exotic tasting apricot tea while they discussed the recent events in the lecture hall.

“The leopard who asked about the energy equation, what was that about?” Kap started after first eating half his sandwich.

Raj nodded knowingly. “That was Professor Aarush. He is the chairman of the Engineering Department. It was his team who build the University’s current particle accelerator. He naturally would be most interested in the energy calculation.”

Kap’s father took a deep breath while trying to think how to explain the concept to his, as-yet non-mathematical son.

“You see, we have to use particle accelerators to detect subatomic particles because they are smaller than light itself. You can’t just shine a light and see them. Particle accelerators require energy. The smaller the particle, the more energy it takes to find one. It’s a complicated relationship described by the Energy Equation. The problem is, if my 7-Blade particle exists, it is so small that it would require an accelerator more powerful than anything we can imagine.”

Raj paused to let that information sink in. Then he continued. “Professor Aarush, an engineer, sees that as an insurmountable barrier. But I see it as more of a mathematical puzzle, one that asks us to look at the whole picture, not just the individual pieces.”

As usual, Kap was sightly lost by his father’s explanation. He held a sip of tea in his mouth for a few moments, savoring its flavor while contemplating how a thing could be smaller than light itself.

“I don’t get it,” he finally spoke up. “If it’s too small to be seen, how can you be sure it’s there?”

Raj savored his own tea before continuing. “It means we can’t merely use brute force to find it. We have to look instead at

the larger world and figure out how those particles might make it work.”

Raj could see his explanation was going over Kap’s head. “Let me show you. Look over there at the fruit stand. Do you see the leopard arguing with its owner?” Kap nodded yes. “And that panther counting money in his paw. And that other leopard looking over both of their shoulders with curiosity. The fruit on the table is causing those people to act in very specific and recognizable ways, even though the fruit itself is doing nothing. You don’t need to see the fruit to know what is going on. The same idea applies to very small particles.”

Kap thought about the example. Perhaps it was something he could understand after all. He then moved to the next question that was bothering him.

“Why didn’t they stay for the rest of your lecture? They all got up and left. They were pretty upset about that extra time dimension thing.”

“*Time-like* dimension,” Raj Grey corrected. “The extra one doesn’t work exactly like ordinary time. It just means the 7-Blade particles have a tendency to loop back upon themselves into earlier states. The loops are microscopic, also smaller than light. But Professor Aarush was correct in stating that a particle could therefore be doing more than one thing at the same time.” Raj rolled his eyes impatiently. “But it’s not really the same time, as I tried to explain. The two times are perpendicular to each other and separate.”

Kap was lost again. He was distracted by the fruit stand. Kap also remembered the one other detail that he had meant to bring up. “There was someone else in the audience who got my attention: a tiger seated in the second row, seat four. He didn’t talk to anyone. The odd thing was his reaction. It was opposite to everyone else. He

actually smiled when you said that thing about two time dimensions.”

Raj Grey suddenly seemed lost in his own thoughts. “Time-like,” he mumbled half-heartedly. “Yes, I know who that was. His name is Colonel Kineer. He was one of General Fariq’s top men in the army. He now holds the office of the Minister of Science.” Raj thought about his son’s observation. “He smiled, you said?”

Kap swallowed the last bite of his sandwich. “Yes. And he nodded. He was the only one there who seemed to like your lecture.”

“That is definitely odd,” Raj answered while toying with the last bite of his sandwich, moving it around the plate with one claw. “They’re not a very progressive bunch, the new Ministry. Afraid of new ideas. They don’t like change...” He corrected himself. “Well, unless *they* are the ones bringing about that change. I’m not sure what to make of Colonel Kineer’s reaction. I almost wish he had frowned. That would at least be predictable.” Raj finished his sandwich with a gulp of tea. “We should be going. It’s getting late and I have a lot to think about.”

Kap stood up from the table and took one last gaze around the Marketplace. He took a deep breath to sample the market’s enticing smells. Aside from the numerous orange-painted faces, the place looked and smelled like it always had. Still, he knew that underneath, things had changed. Even though its people were doing the same old things, their minds were somewhere else. He suddenly had the vaguest perception that the Marketplace of his memory no longer existed, replaced by something that only looked like it on the surface.

Stop thinking like that, Kap ordered himself. It’s just the face paint. The Marketplace is still here. This is still my city. I’ll see it again tomorrow just like I always have.

The Regression Particle

With that last thought, Kap and his father left the street-side cafe and made their way back toward home just as the first lamp lighters were beginning to light the phosphor stones in the streetlamps. Their soft yellow light marked the familiar crossover from day to night in the city, a transformation still familiar and comforting to Kap in a world that had changed overnight.



Kap was jarred awake in his bed sometime after midnight. His father stood over him and shook Kap's shoulders roughly. "Kapoor! Wake up!" Raj said urgently. "We have to get out of the house. There's a fire."

Kap sat forward in his bed momentarily disoriented. He looked around his darkened room. Everything looked in place. He saw no fire. "I don't see..." Then he smelled it, the smell of burning wood in a fireplace, however subtly different. There was also the smell of burning paint, carpet, and curtains. Kap jumped out of his bed and pulled on a pair of pants. He then followed his father into the hallway to the top of the stairs.

"The fire is downstairs," Raj said with pressured calmness. "But we still have a clear path to the door. Follow me." He raced down the stairs with Kap close behind.

At the bottom of the staircase, the smoke became thick and choking. Kap could see licks of yellow flame coming from the kitchen. Their route to the front door, however, was clear. They still had plenty of time to get out of the house.

"What about your books in the upstairs library?" Kap said, thinking they had time to rescue some of them.

Raj shook his head. “There are too many. The fire department will be here soon. They can save the books. We need to save ourselves.” Raj guided his son through the smoke-filled living room to the front door.

At the door, as his father was opening it, Kap looked back over his shoulder. Other than smoke, the fire was still contained to the kitchen. He knew there was time to race up the stairs, grab a handful of books, then come back down. He could do it in under a minute. In the worst case, there was a window in the upstairs study that he could climb out if necessary. In a moment of impulsivity, Kap bolted toward the stairs through the smoke as his father exited the house.

In seconds Kap was standing in his father’s study. The air was still clear in the room. He eyed the bookshelves lining the study walls. His father had been right. There were hundreds of books and no time to get them all.

Instead, Kap focused on his father’s desk. There he spotted the large leather-bound book that contained Professor Grey’s lecture from that day. Kap grabbed the book, then stopped. Lying next to it he spotted the black particle lens his father had shown him. Kap picked up the heavy object and rolled its smooth surface in his paws. He doubted the thing was worth saving and it probably wouldn’t be harmed by the fire, but nevertheless, he wanted it, so Kap slipped it into his pant pocket.

Turning to race back down the stairs, Kap noticed the study window that looked onto the street below. He could hear voices from the street. Kap went to the window to see who was there.

Looking down from the second-story window, Kap could see his father speaking urgently to three tiger constables who had arrived before the fire department. Raj gestured wildly toward the building.

“My son is still in there. You have to help me rescue him.”

Kap started to open the window to let his father know he was all right. He froze midway. In an unexpected and swift motion, the constable standing in front of his father unsheathed his saber and plunged it violently into Raj Grey’s chest. The constable behind him plunged his saber likewise into Raj’s back. Kap watched the scene in stunned horror, unable to breathe or move, unable to comprehend what he was witnessing.

As Professor Grey sank to the ground on his knees, the third constable plunged his saber into the side of Raj’s neck. Kap’s father coughed once with a spray of blood, then toppled forward onto the cobblestones.

Kap suddenly found his voice. “DAD, NO!” he screamed.

The three constables jerked their attention toward the window. The lead constable gestured to one of his subordinates to go into the building. The junior constable raced toward the open door of Kap’s burning home.

Kap had no time to process the horror he had just witnessed. He had to escape but realized he was now trapped. With one constable coming up from below, Kap’s only exit was through the window where the other two constables waited for him on the street. He scanned the room desperately looking for someplace to hide. The only real option was under his father’s desk but that would be obvious.

Seconds later the constable who had tried to enter the house came staggering back out to the street, choking. “The smoke is too strong,” he gasped to his colleagues. “Let the fire get him.”

“Run around and guard the backside of the house,” the lead constable ordered. “We’ll watch the front.”

As the officer ran toward the back of the house, Kap's mind raced in desperation. With the front and back doors guarded, only the windows remained, and he would be seen if he tried to climb out. Kap was out of escape options.

Then, Kap remembered something from when he was a young cub. While playing in the basement, he had once found a crawl space that extended underneath the buildings adjacent to his home. The space had been narrow, and rocky, and even as a child it had been difficult to squeeze through.

Kap had no choice but to give it a try. He ran out of the study to the top of the stairwell still holding his father's book. The fire had by now spread considerably. Smoke blasted upward from below in a black choking plume. Kap could neither see nor breathe. He stepped back to his father's study to catch a breath of air. To get to the basement he would have to do it by memory with his eyes closed and breath held. Reluctantly, Kap set his father's research book on the floor knowing it would likely perish in the fire. He would need both paws free if he was going to survive.

I'm going to do this. Dad would want me to live.

Kap took three deep breaths, squeezed his eyes shut, then plunged down the stairs into the hot smoke. At the bottom of the stairwell, he was met by the searing lick of flames. He had no choice but to go through them. Kap leaped blindly through the fire in the direction he remembered toward the basement door. Luckily his paws hit unburnt wood when he landed, though he crashed into a lamp table and chair. Kap scrambled to the basement door, his lungs now screaming for air.

In the smoke-filled darkness, Kap found the basement door and opened it. To his relief, the air below was still cool and fresh. Kap took a gasping breath, then raced down the dark steps. Halfway

down he tripped and tumbled the remaining steps to the cement floor below. His left knee hit the ground hard, and he felt a crack.

Kap did not wait for the pain. He ran toward the back of the basement where he had once discovered the crawl space. He found the hole in the brick basement wall, and true to memory, it was almost impossibly small. For once, Kap was thankful for his slender, child-like body that had yet to experience its teen growth spurt. He squeezed and scratched his way through the opening.

The floor of the crawl space was lined with rough, jagged rocks. The underside of the house was just inches above the rocks. Kap had to army-crawl over the sharp stones with his back pressed hard against the building above. He could feel the stones cutting through his fur and into his skin, however, any pain it might cause was masked by Kap's panic.

Kap crawled like this in complete darkness for several yards. As a child, he had never gone far and had always turned back. Now, he had no choice but to press forward. At last, Kap caught a faint glow of light ahead. Scratching his way toward it, he arrived at an iron grate that opened from under one of his neighbor's houses. Mercifully the nails that held it in place were ancient and rusted. With a few shoves, Kap was able to push through the grate. As he squeezed out from under the building, the rough frame around the grate gouged deeply into his skin. Kap collapsed onto the outside ground bleeding but alive, breathing in the cool night air in gulps.

Kap was free of the fire, but not out of danger.

To his right, Kap could make out the shadowy outline of a constable standing in the alley at the backdoor entrance to his home just a few yards away. The noise from the fire had apparently disguised the sound of Kap pushing open the iron grate. The officer had not noticed him. Kap pressed himself against his neighbor's

home and crawled silently out of the alley toward the cross street just ahead.

At the street, Kap quickly looked in both directions. There were no constables in sight, only a horse-drawn cart making its way slowing up the street toward him. Kap shrunk back into the shadow of the alley. He would wait for the cart to pass, then make his escape.

To his surprise, the driver of the cart stopped in front of the alley. "Get in, quickly," the man said. Kap didn't move from his hiding place. "Yes, I see you hiding there. If you want to live, get in."

Cautiously, Kap emerged from the shadows. The driver was an old dog with a cape thrown over his shoulders for warmth. He was towing a cart full of garbage. Kap now recognized him as the trash collector who routinely made his rounds through the neighborhood. Kap warily approached the driver seat of the cart.

"Not here," the dog said. "In the back." He stepped down from his seat and walked to the back of the cart. There he opened its rear gate. "Jump in quickly before they see you."

Kap followed the dog to the back of the cart. His nose was assaulted by the smell of piles of rotting garbage the man had collected from around the neighborhood. Kap looked back toward the alley where the constable guarded his home, now engulfed in flames. More officers would soon come. Kap had little choice but to trust the garbage collector, so he climbed reluctantly into the cart.

"Bury yourself in the trash," the dog instructed. He reached for a shovel and scooped up some of the stinking material. "I'll help you." After Kap was covered thoroughly in the refuse, the dog made his way back to the driver seat and spoke a soft word to his horse. The animal resumed his slow forward movement. The driver looked back over his shoulder. "It helps if you breathe only through your mouth. Try not to cough, or they'll hear you."

The garbage collector made it to the street that passed in front of Kap's home. The horse turned in the opposite direction, and they slowly made their way from the burning building. Kap did as instructed, breathing through his mouth instead of his nose, though he could still taste the fumes from the rotting material covering him. It was all he could do not to vomit.

Sure enough, more constables were making their way toward the fire. Two tiger officers ran quickly past the trash cart. Then, one of them stopped and turned back.

"You. Dog. What are you carrying?" The officer walked up to the back gate of the cart.

The garbage collector stepped down from his seat and greeted the officer. "Good evening, sir. I hope you are well. I'm just making my rounds tonight collecting the garbage."

"Open the gate," the officer commanded. "Let me see."

The dog complied with the constable's order, opening the back gate to reveal his collection of garbage. The tiger then drew his saber preparing to probe the piles of refuse.

At that moment the dog erupted into a fit of coughing that startled the constable. When the coughing fit finally quieted, he apologized. "I'm sorry sir. The fumes from the garbage... they get into your lungs."

The tiger was now less enthusiastic about exploring the piles of rotting material. He gingerly overturned a few items with his metal blade, then wiped it clean on his boot and returned it to its sheath. "Go on then," he said to the dog.

The garbage collector bowed respectfully, then returned to the driver seat of his cart. "Go," he said quietly to his horse. The constable turned and ran toward the commotion of the burning building.

After several minutes of riding in silence, Kap finally spoke up. "Can I come out now?" Even breathing through his mouth, the vapors were almost more than he could stand.

"Not until we are out of the city," the dog replied barely audible. He dared not be overheard speaking to the stowaway in his cart.

Kap closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on not vomiting. At last, he failed at the task and threw up the remnants of his dinner. The hot liquid contents of his stomach mixed with the surrounding garbage induced him to vomit a second time. This was followed by dry heaving.

"Try to be quiet," the dog whispered again. "We're coming to the city gate."

Still buried in trash, Kap's head now lay in a puddle of his own vomit. He squeezed his eyes tight and tried not to breathe at all.

Moments later, the garbage driver stopped his cart at the gates of the city which, at this time of night, were barred closed. Two tiger constables guarding the gate ordered the dog to open his cart for another inspection. The dog dismounted his seat and obeyed. This was followed by another round of dramatic coughing and the spitting of phlegm. The constables were likewise reluctant to inspect the garbage piles. After a perfunctory glance into the cart, they opened the city gate and waved the dog forward.

After several more minutes of silent riding, the dog spoke up. "We're clear now. You can come out."

Kap emerged from under the pile of garbage gasping for air and choking. He had to climb over more piles of rotting material to reach the front of the cart where he climbed the rail and took a seat next to the driver. His fur was now covered in the smells of people's

rotting food along with his own vomit mixed with his own blood. The smell was strong even for the garbage collector who coughed again, this time for real.

Kap hung his head low in misery. “Where are you taking me?”

“Into the mountains,” the dog answered, pointing upward into the distance. “I know a place you can stay. It’s where I take the others.”

Kap looked up at the man. “There are others?”

The dog lowered his head and nodded silently.

Kap wondered how many others in the city had been run out of their homes by fire—probably none of them tigers. “My name is Kap, uh, Kapoor Grey.”

“Timeer,” was all the dog said, giving no last name. He did not seem inclined to talk, preferring to ride in silence.

It was then that Kap noticed a solid object in his pant pocket. He reached in and pulled out the smooth particle lens. Kap had completely forgotten he had taken it from his father’s study. He ran his paw over its dark, polished surface. Tears welled in his eyes as he realized he would never see his father again, and this single memento was his only possession from his previous life.

Not wanting an emotional breakdown in front of the garbage collector, Kap looked away from the lens and up toward the mountains. The journey would take hours. The winding mountain trail would eventually take them above the tree line into the barren alpine tundra. Kap lay on his side, curling his knees to his chest, clutching the lens in his paw. He would try to get some rest on their journey, but sleep would never come. Each time it came close he was jarred awake by the vision of his father’s final moment, the bloody cough, the tumble to the stones.

The Regression Particle



How many more are there? he wondered.